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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR MEETS WITH KEY SARKOZY ADVISOR FRANCOIS  
FILLON

11. (SBU) Summary: Sarkozy advisor and former Education Minister Francois Fillon told the Ambassador December 20 that Sarkozy had a chance to buck the French predisposition to vote against the ruling party in 2007 by focusing his presidential campaign on the electorate's deep-seated desire for real "change." Fillon argued that the victor in 2007 would need to make the presidency more personally accountable and involved in explaining government policy to the populace. The EU, in Fillon's opinion, is struggling under the weight of new members, and it was time to bring the UK into the Franco-German union in order to move the body forward. Fillon believed transatlantic relations would be more cordial under a Sarkozy presidency; although disagreements would certainly arise, they would be handled in a more nuanced manner. Fillon elaborated on Sarkozy's plan to improve the French economy through welfare reform and greater flexibility for businesses, and offered his own views on needed changes for the French education system. End Summary.

#### 2007 Elections

12. (SBU) The Ambassador met December 20 with Francois Fillon, former Minister of Education (2004-2005) and Social Affairs, Labor, and Solidarity (2002-2004) in the Raffarin government, who was named in July 2005 to be the Political Counselor to Nicolas Sarkozy in his role as president of the Union for a Popular Movement (UMP). Fillon noted the instability of the French Fifth Republic compared to the governments of Germany and the UK, and commented that the French electorate always voted for change. This suggested that the Socialist Party (PS) should logically win in 2007, but Sarkozy had a chance because he was a strong proponent for change, whereas the PS had turned into a party of "restoration" of the status quo ante. He insisted that most French voters really do want change, although he conceded that they are also afraid of losing what they have. Chirac always erred on the side of French fears rather than a desire for change and Villepin's big liability would be that he is seen as a continuation of Chirac. Sarkozy, by contrast, was betting that people really wanted reform.

13. (SBU) Fillon believed that Sarkozy would remain in the government until January of 2007, when the UMP would officially nominate its presidential candidate, at which time he would break with Chirac/Villepin to run for the presidency. He said that Chirac and Villepin would do everything possible in the meantime to trip him up. The recent unrest in the suburbs had not hurt Sarkozy, Fillon noted, because he was seen as taking action on the issue. Fillon did not foresee a cohabitation government, saying, "The people will choose a president and give him a majority" in Parliament.

#### Institutional Reform

14. (SBU) Elaborating on his statement that the French Fifth Republic is inherently "unstable," Fillon said there was a need to move to a presidential system in which the president would have to take a more active role in explaining the government's actions to the people and the parliament. (The only such public appearance by Chirac was his disastrous Town Hall-style appearance in early May in favor of the EU Constitution.) While there were also arguments in favor of a more parliamentary system, Fillon said that it would be impossible to convince the French electorate to abandon the election of a president by universal suffrage. Nor was it possible any longer for the president to remain above the fray, he said, then blame everything on the PM. The move to a five-year presidential term of office had reinforced this trend. He characterized what he said was a PS plan to weaken the powers of the presidency in favor of the prime minister as "unrealistic."

#### The EU

15. (SBU) The EU currently suffered from a lack of direction and leadership, Fillon said. He explained that enlargement was the main problem, which made it difficult to take decisions efficiently. "We can hardly express ourselves in meetings" with 25 members, he lamented, since there was no time to take the floor more than once. In order to move the EU forward, Fillon saw a need to expand the Franco-German

"couple" into a Franco-Germano-British "menage a trois." His basic point was that it was hollow to think that Europe could progress without the UK. He saw the emergence of Angela Merkel as positive, while commenting that Chirac was trying to make his relationship with her appear closer than it was in the vane of the mythical Franco-German tandem. Returning to his analysis of the French electorate, Fillon argued that the May 29 French referendum vote was not a rejection of change or Europe, but in fact a vote for a more radical overhaul of the system. This coincided with the tendency of the French to vote against the current government, which had backed the EU Constitution. However, Fillon conceded this was his interpretation, and that it was difficult at the moment to accurately draw conclusions from the referendum vote.

#### U.S.-French Relations

16. (SBU) Fillon thought a Sarkozy government would better be able to work together with the U.S., and be less overtly critical and more nuanced in its public statements. Under Sarkozy, he continued, disagreements would not as easily lead to blow-ups with close and vital allies. At the same time, he cautioned, this would not change the very real anti-American sentiments of some parts of the French populace. In response to the Ambassador's comment that France is perceived as an obstacle to U.S. ambitions for NATO, Fillon noted that there needed to be a better balance in NATO between Europe and the U.S. First, however, he said that Europeans themselves needed to be clearer about their priorities. Separately, Fillon noted that Sarkozy did not necessarily see the need for high levels of defense spending.

#### Economy

17. (SBU) On economic issues, Fillon called for fusing welfare with unemployment so that the unemployed would be more compelled to take jobs they were offered. He noted that a Sarkozy economic system would push for more flexibility for businesses and a simplification of the work codes. He also advocated breaking the power of unions, including requiring that elections be held every several years with open candidacies.

#### Education

18. (SBU) Fillon spoke at length about giving schools more autonomy (citing this as yet another area where Europe was falling behind), but stopped short of recommending decentralization. He criticized the burdensome bureaucracy of the education system and lamented that the short time that leaders remain in power limited their ability to effect change. Increasing immigration required adaptation of the system, but France had avoided such adjustments. He thought universities should become independent, and that communes should assume more responsibility for early education. He talked about using limited resources for overtime pay for those teachers willing and most able.

#### Comment

19. (SBU) Fillon came across as a seasoned, non-dogmatic, and serious political figure. He appeared pragmatic, forthcoming, accessible, and open to continued dialogue. He has commented publicly on his disappointment at not being included in the Villepin government because of his support of Sarkozy. Fillon is among Sarkozy's closest advisors, and is considered a potential prime ministerial candidate should Sarkozy be elected president in 2007. End Comment.

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Stapleton